


STEVENS, THADDEUS

DRAWER 100

CONTEMPORARIES

71.2008.085.0329b



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2013

<http://archive.org/details/abrahamlincolnsccltslinc>

Abraham Lincoln's Contemporaries

Thaddeus Stevens

Excerpts from newspapers and other
sources

From the files of the
Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection

Abraham Lincoln and Thaddeus Stevens were strangely mated. Lincoln as President and Stevens as commoner of the nation during the entire period of our sectional war assumed the highest civil responsibilities in the administrative and legislative departments of the government.

While Lincoln was President of the whole people, Stevens, as commoner, was their immediate representative and oracle in the popular branch of Congress when the most momentous legislative measures of our history were conceived and enacted.

No two men were so much alike in all the sympathy of greatness for the friendless and the lowly, and yet no two men could have been more unlike in the methods by which they sought to obtain the same great end.

Lincoln's humanity was one of the master attributes of his character, and it was next to impossible for him to punish even those most deserving of it.

In Stevens humanity and justice were singularly blended, and, while his heart was ever ready to respond to the appeal of sorrow, he was one of the sternest of men in the administration of justice upon those who had oppressed the helpless.

No man pleaded so eloquently in Congress for the deliverance of the bondmen of the South as did Stevens, and he made ceaseless battle for every measure needed by ignorant freedmen for the enjoyment of their rights obtained through the madness of southern rebellion; and there was no man of all our statesmen whose voice was so eloquent for the swift punishment of the authors of the war.

There were those around Stevens in Congress much riper in experience in national legislation, for he had served but six years in the House when the war began, and four of those were nearly a decade before the rebellion; but

When the Great Conflict Came, before which all but the bravest-hearted quailed, Stevens' superior ability and dauntless courage made him speedily accepted by all as the leader of the popular branch of Congress.

In all the conflicts of opinion and grave doubts among even the sincerest of men as to the true policy of the government in meeting armed rebellion Stevens was the one man who never faltered, who never hesitated, who never temporized, but who was ready to meet aggressive treason with the most aggressive assaults. He and Lincoln worked substantially on the same lines, earnestly striving to attain the same ends; but Stevens was always in advance of public sentiment, while Lincoln ever halted until assured that the considerate judgment of the nation would sustain him. Stevens had faith that the people would sustain the war—that they would patriotically submit to any sacrifice of blood and treasure necessary to preserve the Union and overthrow slavery that was the cause of fraternal conflict, and he was always in the lead in pressing every measure that promised to weaken the slave power in any part of the Union.

Lincoln was inspired by the same patriotic purpose and sympathies with Stevens in everything but his policy of vengeance. Lincoln possessed the sagacity to await the fulness of time for all things, and thus he failed in nothing. These two great civil leaders were not in close personal relations. Stevens was ever impatient of Lincoln's tardiness, and Lincoln was always patient with Stevens' advanced and often impracticable methods. Stevens was a born dictator in politics; Lincoln a born follower of the people, but always wisely aiding them to the safest judgment that was to be his guide.

Stevens never saw Lincoln during the war, except when necessity required it. It was

Not His Custom to Fawn upon power or flatter authority, and his free and incisive criticism of public men generally prevented him from being in sympathetic touch with most of the officials connected with the administration. He was one of the earliest of the party leaders to demand the unconditional and universal freedom of the slaves, and he often grieved Lincoln sorely by his mandatory appeals for an emancipation proclamation, and by the keen satire that only he could employ against those who differed from him.

It was known to but few that he suffered a serious disappointment from Lincoln when Cameron was appointed to the cabinet. It was his second disappointment in

his efforts to reach cabinet honors. In December, 1839, when the Whig national convention was about to meet at Harrisburg to decide whether Clay, Harrison or Scott should be honored with the candidacy, Harrison sent to Stevens by Mr. Purdy an autograph letter voluntarily proposing that, if Harrison should be nominated and elected President, Stevens would be made a member of his cabinet. Stevens was one of the most potent of the political leaders in that convention, and he finally controlled the nomination for Harrison. He never saw or heard from Harrison from that time until he was inaugurated as President, and he was astounded when the cabinet was nominated to the Senate to find his name omitted. So reticent was he as to Harrison's previous proffer of the position that Mr. Burroughs, who was at the head of the Pennsylvanians in Washington urging Stevens' appointment, was never advised of the promise he held from Harrison for the place.

Harrison died too early to feel the retribution that would surely have come from Stevens, but in

His Second Disappointment

Stevens was face to face with Lincoln, and side by side with him until death divided them. Only once during Lincoln's administration can I recall Stevens' positive and enthusiastic commendation of Lincoln, and that was when he issued his emancipation proclamation in 1862. He then believed in Lincoln, and expected a rapid advance in every line of aggression against slavery and rebellion, but soon new causes of dissent arose between them, as Stevens called for the speedy confiscation of property of those in rebellion, and for the punishment of all who were responsible for the civil war. Thus they continued during the whole period of Lincoln's administration, both earnestly working to solve the same great problems in the interest of free government, and yet seldom in actual harmony in their methods and policies.

After the death of Lincoln, Stevens was one of the earliest of the Republican leaders to place himself in an aggressively hostile attitude to Johnson, and he persisted in it with tireless energy until he performed his last great task in his plea before the Senate for the conviction of the President under articles of impeachment preferred by the House. After the acquittal of Johnson he seemed almost entirely hopeless of preserving the fruits of the victory won by our armies in the overthrow of the rebellion. I last met him at his house some three weeks before his death. He spoke of the perfidy of Johnson with great bitterness, and seemed clouded with gloom as to the

Achievements of His Own Life.

He then hoped to go to Bedford Springs to recover sufficient vigor to be able to resume his seat at the next session, but he saw little of the future that promised restoration of the Union with justice to the liberated slaves. Although he was the acknowledged commoner of the war, and the acknowledged leader of the House as long as he was able to retain his seat after the war had closed, he said: "My life has been a failure. With all this great struggle of years in Washington, and the fearful sacrifice of life and treasure, I see little hope for the Republic." After a moment's pause his face suddenly brightened, and he said: "After all, I may say that my life has not been entirely vain. When I remember that I gave free schools to Pennsylvania, my adopted state, I think my life may have been worth the living." He had lately reprinted his speech, delivered in the Pennsylvania House in 1835, that changed the body from its purpose to repeal the free school law, and he handed me a copy of it, saying: "That was the proudest effort of my life. It gave schools to the poor and helpless children of the state." Thus did the great commoner of the nation, crowned with the greenest laurels of our statesmanship, turn back more than a generation from his greatest achievements because they were incomplete, although fully assured, to find the silver lining to the many disappointments of his life.

Stevens, like Lincoln, had few intimate acquaintances, and no one in whom he implicitly confided. That he had some untold sorrow was accepted by all who knew him well, but none could venture to invade the sacred portals of his inner life. He seldom spoke of himself, but his grim, cynical smile and his pungent invective against the social customs of the times proclaimed his love of solitude, except when his lot could be cast with the very few congenial spirits he found around him.

One Name Alone

ever brightened his stern face and kindled the gray eye that was so often lustreless, and that name was "mother." He loved to speak of her, and when he did so all the harsh lines of his countenance disappeared to give place to the tenderness of a child. That one devotion was like an oasis in the desert of his affections, and, regardless of his individual convictions, he revered

everything taught him by his mother. In his will he provided that the sexton of her little churchyard in the bleak hills of Vermont should ever keep her grave green, "and plant roses and other cheerful flowers at each of the four corners of said grave every spring." He also made a devise of \$1000 to aid in the building of a Baptist church in Lancaster, giving in the will this reason for it: "I do this out of respect to the memory of my mother, to whom I owe what little prosperity I have had on earth, which, small as it is, I desire emphatically to acknowledge."

I need hardly say that a man of Stevens' positive and aggressive qualities left an enduring record of his greatness in both the statutes and the fundamental law of the nation. Stevens was the master-spirit of every aggressive movement in Congress to overthrow the rebellion and slavery. His views of the civil war and of reconstruction were pointedly presented in the confiscation act of July 17, 1862, and he was the author of the 14th amendment to the national constitution, although it was not accepted as he would have preferred it.

My relations with Stevens for a dozen years before his death were peculiarly pleasant and as intimate, perhaps, as was common between him and those in the narrow circle of his close acquaintances. He spent his summers at his quiet mountain furnace home in Franklin county, where I resided, and during the few years that I was in active practice at the bar in Chambersburg he attended our courts and tried one side of nearly every important cause. In all my acquaintance with the lawyers of Pennsylvania, I regard Stevens as having more nearly completed the circle of

A Great Lawyer

than any other member of the Pennsylvania bar. He was perfect in practice, a master of the law, exceptionally skillful in eliciting testimony from witnesses, a most sagacious, eloquent and persuasive advocate, and one of the strongest men before a law court that I have ever heard. He was thoroughly master of himself in his profession, and his withering invective and crushing wit, so often employed in conversation and in political speeches, were never displayed in the trial of a cause unless it was eminently wise to do so; and he was one of the most courteous of men at the bar, whether associate or opponent. He was especially generous in his kindness to young members of the bar, unless they undertook to unduly flap their fledgling wings, when they were certain to suffer speedily and humiliatingly. His trial of the Hanway treason case before Judge Greer in the United States court at Philadelphia exhibited his matchless skill in the best use of his matchless powers. While he conceived and directed every feature of the defence, he was the silent man of the trial. He knew the political prejudices which were attached to his then odious attitude on the slavery question, and he put upon the late Chief Justice John M. Read the laboring oars of the trial, as Read was a Democrat of state and even national fame. It was a trial that attracted the attention, not only of the nation, but of the civilized world, and was the first case adjudicated in Pennsylvania in our higher courts under the fugitive slave law of 1850. Mr. Gorsuch, a Virginia minister, pursuing his slave into Chester county, was killed in an altercation at Christiana by the friends of the hunted bondman, and Hanway and others were indicted for treason in inciting to rebellion and murder. Hanway was acquitted, and he owed his deliverance to the legal acumen and skill of Thaddeus Stevens.

The dust of Thaddeus Stevens reposes under

A Humble Monument.

suggested by himself, located in the humble "City of the Silent," chosen by him because it recognized "equality of man before his Creator," and admitted any of every race and color to sleep the sleep that knows no waking. The inscription on his monument, dictated by himself, is in these words:

THADDEUS STEVENS,
Born at Danville, Caledonia Co., Vermont,
April 4, 1792.
Died at Washington, D. C.,
August 11, 1868.

I repose in this quiet and secluded spot,
Not from any natural preference for solitude,
But, finding other Cemeteries limited as to
Race

By Charter Rules,
I have chosen this that I might illustrate
In my death
The Principles which I advocated
Through a long life:
EQUALITY OF MAN BEFORE HIS CREATOR.

A. K. McCLEURE.

The Washington Star

JOE L. ALLBRITTON, Publisher

JAMES G. BELLOW, Editor

SIDNEY EPSTEIN, Managing Editor

EDWIN M. YODER JR., Associate Editor

TUESDAY, JANUARY 18, 1977

Letters to the editor

Reader stands up for Stevens

his column on Jan. 6, The ar's Edwin M. Yoder Jr. attempted to breathe new life into the old distorted caricature of Thaddeus Stevens as a "sarcastic, vengeful, caustic, club-footed hypocrite." Pro-slavery journalists created this image during Stevens's lifetime, and biased historians have maintained it for over a century. The old Van Heflin movie, "Tennessee Johnson," provides a good illustration of how deeply this version of Stevens's character has penetrated our national folklore.

I have often been astonished by the vehemence with which Stevens's posthumous critics continue to attack him. And I have found the nature of their attacks truly singular. For if Stevens were merely criticized for the dubious constitutionality of the Johnson impeachment effort and a few other partisan excesses, I would find the criticisms reasonable and justified. But what never fails to amaze me is the personal tone of the attacks.

We always hear of Stevens's "vindictiveness" and "self-righteousness." The old slander that he kept a black mistress is not infrequently revived. Often it is cruelly suggested that Stevens's supposed "resentfulness" stemmed from his physical handicap. When a man long dead and almost forgotten is

subjected to personal abuse, I think I am justified in suspecting the motives of his detractors.

The truth of the matter, I suspect, is that men like Yoder will never forgive Stevens because of what he stood for. Stevens was an implacable opponent of slavery, and when he saw slavery abolished, he did everything he could to ensure the real political equality of black and white. Given that the Klan and



ABRAHAM LINCOLN
The Great Emancipator?

other associations of former slave owners were almost daily terrorizing and murdering black freedmen, Stevens can be forgiven for doubting the sincerity of rebel contrition. He realized stern measures were necessary, that the slaveocracy was a ruthless class that would stop at nothing to regain its power.

Because Stevens believed in racial equality, he is said to have lacked compassion. It is interesting to note that Lincoln, universally praised by white historians for his compassion, most emphatically did not believe in racial equality.

Lincoln, of course, was very reluctant to grant emancipation. He hoped to preserve the Union and slavery as well. Stevens and other abolitionists had prodded him for two years before he issued his famous proclamation. Even then, Lincoln reiterated his hopes of recolonizing all the freedmen in Africa. It is a supreme irony of history that Lincoln is known as the Great Emancipator. Stevens, lifetime abolitionist and sponsor of the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments, is far more deserving of the title.



THADDEUS STEVENS
Implacable foe of slavery

The mythology of the Civil War, however, was established in the post-Reconstruction era. It was established largely by white men who favored, or at least acquiesced in, the disenfranchisement of Southern blacks. Naturally, Stevens had to be cast as the villain.

It is amusing to see to what lengths Stevens's detractors will go — even today. Yoder, for instance, is so eager to defame Stevens that he writes patent absurdities. Stevens, he remarks, was a "revolutionary masquerading as a democrat." This implies that "revolutionary" and "democrat" are mutually exclusive terms. One wonders what Jefferson, Paine or Randolph would have thought of that.

Austin Hughes
Hyattsville, Md.



11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60
61
62
63
64
65
66
67
68
69
70
71
72
73
74
75
76
77
78
79
80
81
82
83
84
85
86
87
88
89
90
91
92
93
94
95
96
97
98
99
100

